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Friday, January 15, 2010
Story last updated at 1/15/2010 - 11:05 am

Fairbanks school to study invasive sweet clover

The Associated Press

FAIRBANKS - Scientists in Alaska want to discover if bees are paying a little too much attention to a stranger.

The University of Alaska, Fairbanks, has received an almost \$500,000 federal grant to study the impact of the white sweet clover on wild food sources, such as blueberry and cranberry bushes.

The invasive plant thrives in newly burned areas, which can put it in competition for soil with berry plants. Researchers, however, also think the clover is affecting the pollination process of indigenous vegetation.

Bees that collect pollen from clover patches don't help other plants when they unintentionally transfer it during visits. As a result, the neglected berry plants might not get the attention they need from bees to thrive.

"You're out in the field, and the bumblebees are all over (the clover)," said Steven Seefeldt, a U.S. Department of Agriculture crop scientist who co-wrote the grant. "It leads to the question, 'Shouldn't they be out fertilizing something else?'"

Invasive plants aren't necessarily bad for pollination. If the newcomers have different flowering cycles than native plants, they might allow insects that visit them to survive better during the growing season. That, in turn, could help berry plants by creating a bigger, healthier crop of bees.

The clover is native to Europe and Asia, but has been spreading quickly through Alaska. It's often seen along roadways and riverbanks.

"We picked those because they're some of the most aggressive and common invasive species," said Christa Mulder, an associate professor with the UAF Institute of Arctic Biology who co-wrote the grant with Seefeldt.

The four-year study will take place from Fairbanks to the Kenai Peninsula.

Seefeldt said the study will look at the consequences of trying to manage the clover species. Low levels of herbicide have proven effective in controlling the plant, and the research will look at how that approach affects soil, water and native plants.

"There is so much white sweet clover in Alaska, I don't think anyone talks about eradication," Seefeldt said. "It's a management issue."

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